NRT Science And Technology Committee
RISK COMMUNICATION FOR OIL SPILL RESPONSE

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SUMMARY
This fact sheet provides background information and guidance on communicating the risks of oil spills and oil spill response measures to the public. It is intended to assist RRTs, OSCs and other Regional and local staff involved in oil spill response.

The fact sheet discusses why risk communication is important, provides a set of risk communication principles, and presents some risk communication strategies. These principles and strategies concern how to convey risks to the public directly (using, for example, public meetings) and through the media. It also includes a brief list of references for further information.

Individual OSCs or other persons may not have the time, resources, or expertise needed to implement all of the recommendations presented below. OSCs and others who have little training or experience in risk communication should carefully review the references listed at the end of this fact sheet and work with risk communication specialists where possible.

The scope of this fact sheet is limited to risk communication for oil spill response generally. Forthcoming fact sheets will provide more specific guidance on risk communication for individual oil spill response techniques (e.g., in situ burning).

INTRODUCTION
General understanding and acceptance of oil spill response measures can be critical to the success of a response effort. Incomplete or inaccurate public information about the risks of an oil spill and possible response measures can limit the range of options available to responders. The most environmentally sensible response option for a particular spill might have to be ruled out due to a lack of public support.

To help ensure that the public perceptions based on incomplete information do not inhibit effective response to oil spills, the risks of different spill response measures -- including the risks and consequences of no action -- must be fully communicated to the media, citizen groups, local governments, and any other interested parties. Risk communication must therefore be addressed not only during a spill event, but also in spill response planning.

WHAT ARE THE RISKS OF OIL SPILLS AND OIL SPILL RESPONSE?
The risks of oil spills and spill response measures are the likelihood of adverse consequences to humans, environmental resources, economic resources (such as private property or commercial fisheries), or cultural/aesthetic resources (such as historical sites).

RISK COMMUNICATION PRINCIPLES
The goal of risk communication is an informed public that is involved, interested, reasonable, thoughtful, solution-oriented, and collaborative. Risk communication should not be used to diffuse public concerns or as a substitute for action.

Although there are no easy prescriptions for successful communication of oil spill response risks, there is general agreement on seven cardinal rules. Many of the rules may seem obvious, but they are often violated in practice.

1. Accept and involve the public as a legitimate partner.

A basic tenet of risk communication is that people and communities have a right to participate in decisions that affect their lives, property, and the quality of the environment.

Demonstrate your respect for the public and underscore the sincerity of your effort by involving the community early, before important decisions are made. Involve all parties that have an interest or a stake in the issue under consideration. If you are a government employee, you will be under considerable pressure and scrutiny. Remember that you work for the public and that it holds you accountable.

2. Plan carefully and evaluate your efforts.

Risk communication will be successful only if carefully planned. Begin with clear, explicit risk communication objectives -- such as providing information to the public, motivating individuals to act, stimulating response to emergencies or contributing to the resolution of conflict. Evaluate the information you have about the risks and know the strengths and weaknesses of that information.

Classify and segment the various groups in your audience. Aim your communications at specific subgroups in your audience. There is no such entity as "the public"; instead, there are many publics, each with its own interests, needs, concerns, priorities, preferences, and organizations. Different risk communication goals, audiences, and media require different risk communication strategies. At the same time, make sure that your basic message remains consistent (regardless of any variations in presentation and emphasis).

Recruit credible spokespeople who are good at presentation and interaction. Train your staff -- including technical staff -- in communication skills. Whenever possible, test your messages by first trying them out within your organization or with specially convened focus groups. Carefully evaluate your efforts and learn from your mistakes.

3. Listen to the public's specific concerns.

If you do not listen to people, you cannot expect them to listen to you. Communication is a two-way activity. Do not make assumptions about what people know, think, or want done about a particular spill. People perceive risks differently. Let all parties that have an interest in the issue be heard. Try to understand their concerns. Recognize people's emotions. Let people know that you understand what they said, addressing their concerns as well as yours. Recognize that there may be "hidden agendas," symbolic meanings, and broader economic or political considerations that often underlie and complicate the task of risk communication.

People in the community are often more concerned about such issues as trust, credibility, competence, control, voluntariness, fairness, caring, and compassion than about mortality statistics or the details of quantitative risk assessment.

4. Be honest, frank, and open.

Trust and credibility are the most precious assets you have. State your credentials, but do not ask or expect to be trusted by the public. If you do not know an answer or are uncertain, say so. Get back to people with answers. Admit any mistakes. Do not speculate or respond to unrealistic “what if” questions. Disclose risk information as soon as possible (emphasizing any reservations about reliability). Do not minimize or exaggerate the level of risk. If in doubt, lean toward sharing more information, not less, or people may think you are hiding something. Discuss data uncertainties, strengths, and weaknesses -- including the ones identified by other credible sources. Identify worst-case estimates as such, and cite ranges of risk estimates when appropriate.

Trust and credibility are difficult to obtain. Once lost they are almost impossible to regain completely.

5. Coordinate and collaborate with other credible sources.

Allies can be effective in helping you communicate risk information. Take time to coordinate all inter-organizational and intra-organizational communications. Devote effort and resources to building bridges with other organizations. Use credible and authoritative intermediaries. Consult with others to determine who is best able to answer questions about risk. Try to issue communications jointly with other trustworthy sources (for example, credible university scientists, physicians, or trusted local officials). Few things make risk communication more difficult than conflicts or public disagreements with other credible sources.

6. Meet the needs of the media.

The media are prime transmitters of information on risks; they play a critical role in setting agendas and in determining outcomes. Be open with and accessible to reporters. Respect their deadlines. Provide risk information tailored to the needs of each type of media (for example, graphics and other visual aids for television). Prepare in advance and provide background material on complex risk issues. Try to establish long-term relationships of trust with specific editors and reporters in the course of planning.
Remember: The media are frequently more interested in personal, human-interest stories than abstract technical issues; more interested in simplicity than in complexity; more interested in danger than in safety.

7. Speak clearly and with compassion.
Technical language and jargon are useful as professional shorthand, but they are barriers to successful communication with the public. Use simple, non-technical language. Use vivid, concrete images that communicate on a personal level. Avoid distant, abstract, unfeeling language when discussing deaths, injuries, and illnesses.
Acknowledge (both in words and with actions) emotions that people express -- anxiety, fear, anger, outrage, helplessness. Acknowledge the distinctions that the public views as important in evaluating risks, such as voluntariness, controllability, familiarity, dread, origin (natural or man-made), benefits, fairness, and catastrophic potential.
Always try to include a discussion of actions that are under way or can be taken. Tell people what you cannot do. Promise only what you can do, and be sure to do what you promise. Keep the following points in mind:
Regardless of how well you communicate risk information, some people will not be satisfied.
Never let your efforts to inform people about risks prevent you from acknowledging -- and saying -- that any illness, injury, or death is a tragedy.
If people are sufficiently motivated, they are quite capable of understanding complex risk information, even if they may not agree with you.

RISK COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES FOR OIL SPILL RESPONSE

Pre-Spill Planning

1. Develop communication materials (such as fact sheets, Q&A documents, brochures, videos, and press kits) on the risks of oil spills and response options and procedures:
Avoid technical terms with which people may be unfamiliar; use plain words whenever possible.
Keep information to the point; do not clutter it with unimportant details.
Acknowledge that the effectiveness of response measures is uncertain.
Use graphs and charts to visually convey information.
Make risk comparisons very carefully (e.g., do not compare risks people choose voluntarily with risks that are chosen for them by someone else).

2. Ensure that the spill response plan(s), (such as an overall Area Contingency Plan, a plan for a specific spill response technique, or a plan for responding to a particular spill) will effectively communicate risks:
Make sure that the plans follow basic risk communication principles to the extent possible (given the need for such plans to be more technical than documents prepared for the general public).
Include relatively non-technical “executive summaries” in the plans that can be easily used during an incident.
Correct any discrepancies or conflicting statements in plans and public information documents.
Ensure that the plans include procedures for public notification of spill response actions prior to or as soon as possible after such actions.

3. Publicize the spill response plan by making it and the related communication materials available to the public:
Use local newspapers and broadcast stations or distribute flyers to neighborhoods to announce availability of the plan and communications documents.

Make the documents available for public inspection.
Designate a point of contact for questions related to the documents.

4. Hold public meetings:
Arrange meetings in locations at times that are convenient to the general public.
Publicize the meeting by calling local organizations and civic groups, notifying newspapers and broadcast stations, and posting flyers in public places.
Consult with other community groups on the agenda for the meeting.
Anticipate questions from audience.
Establish a dialogue with questioners and commenters.
Acknowledge fear, anger, and other feelings.
Follow up by writing news release about the meeting to spread awareness of issues to people who did not attend.
Refine communication materials to reflect concerns and questions stated at public meetings.

5. Coordinate with the media:
Prepare by identifying media contacts and calling them.
Compile a packet of background information about each spill response measure.
Consider press briefings that involve several speakers, information packets, press releases, and Q&A period.
Look into news programs, talk shows, and radio call-in shows.

When A Spill Occurs: Before, During, and After the Response

1. Public Notification:
Work with local government officials to notify the public of an impending response action through media (see below).
Enlist help from and coordinate with local government and state emergency agencies with access to an established public emergency notification system.
Explain how the effects of the oil spill (e.g., odors, contamination, environmental impact) will be monitored to ensure public and worker safety as well as environmental protection.
Explain that the effects of the response (e.g., the smoke plume from in situ burning) also will be carefully monitored, and that it will be carried out thoroughly and as quickly as possible.
Point out that a specific response measure will be conducted only if greater health and environmental protection cannot be achieved by other spill response methods.

2. Dealing with the Media:
Try to understand what the media want to report; reporters are not as interested in the abstract environmental risk level of a particular spill response measure as they are in whether an environmental situation is risky at all, what has happened, and what might happen.
Coordinate with local, area, and other relevant officials in dealing with the media (develop a joint press release and/or conference) to minimize receipt by the media of different, possibly conflicting messages.
Recognize that the media also tend to cover the politics behind the decisions (e.g., who authorized the response, why that response was selected).
Release information to the public and press as quickly as possible without compromising accuracy or coordination with other parties.
Provide clear, reliable information to back up the spill response decision; use previously prepared information, but tailor it to the spill event in question.
Help the media see that the response action selected was the best option at hand; demonstrate that there was not an ulterior motive (e.g., cheaper costs).
Observe media courtesies -- be impartial, sending the same releases and invitations to all.

3. Review and Revision:

After a spill response has been completed, evaluate risk communication plans and the manner in which they were implemented.
Involve local governments (and other governments with which coordination is necessary) in the review.
Revise plans and risk communication materials as appropriate.

SELECTED REFERENCES

Covello, Vincent and Frederick Allen. 1992. Seven Cardinal Rules of Risk Communication. U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. EPA 230-K-92-001.

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Sandman, Peter. 1987. Explaining Environmental Risk. U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. EPA 230-09-89-066.